




ARTICLE

The Metaphysics of Meaning: Aquinas and the Meaning of Life

Patrick Xavier Gardner 

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA, USA
Email: patrickgardner@gmail.com

(Received 25 July 2023; revised 3 November 2023; accepted 4 November 2023)

Abstract

While ‘the meaning of life’ has grown in prominence as a topic of philosophical inquiry, few Thomists have addressed it. Joshua Hochschild has recently offered a plausible explanation, arguing that ‘the meaning of life’ is a late modern ‘invention’, at home in a conceptual framework both philosophically problematic and incompatible with the principles of St. Thomas’ thought. He, therefore, counsels Catholic intellectuals to avoid the question of life’s meaning. I argue in contrast that St. Thomas offers the kind of metaphysical perspective that originally made ‘the meaning of life’ intelligible. First, I show that closer attention to the context in which the phrase emerges (that of German Romanticism) can clarify why much of the modern discourse on ‘the meaning of life’ succumbs to Hochschild’s critique. I then show that, even in the writings of its earliest modern proponents, we find compelling reasons to hold that ‘the meaning of life’ was always more at home within a Christian conceptual framework. Finally, I argue that St. Thomas’ account of providence and divine art in particular explain the purposefulness and significance of the world, such that Thomists who appeal to these notions are well positioned to address the question of life’s meaning in contemporary philosophical debates.

Keywords: ‘meaning of life’; metaphysics; nature; Romanticism; St. Thomas

1. Introduction

In her memoirs, Raïssa Maritain recounts the famous suicide pact that she formed with the young fellow student, Jacques Maritain, who would later become her husband and a prominent Thomist philosopher. Disillusioned with the ‘metaphysical anguish’ they encountered in the academic culture of the Sorbonne, the couple agreed to take their own lives if they could not discover the meaning of life. Mercifully, they were spared this fate:

[W]e decided for some time longer to have confidence in the unknown; we would extend credit to existence, look upon it as an experiment to be made, in the hope

that to our ardent plea, the meaning of life would reveal itself, that new values would stand forth so clearly that they would enlist our total allegiance, and deliver us from the nightmare of a sinister and useless world.¹

The Maritains credited figures such as Henri Bergson, Charles Péguy, and Léon Bloy with helping to resolve their existential crisis. Yet it was principally in the writings of St. Thomas that they found their answer to the question of life's meaning. What is puzzling about this claim is that St. Thomas never uttered the phrase 'the meaning of life'. Moreover, in spite of its growing prominence as a topic of philosophical inquiry² and its adoption into the lexicon of Catholic doctrine,³ virtually no Thomists apart from the Maritains have even addressed the question of life's 'meaning'.⁴

Joshua Hochschild has recently offered a plausible explanation for this reticence. 'The meaning of life', he notes, has a surprisingly short and recent history.⁵ It is not a timeless expression but 'a new concept or whole framework of concepts' that 'finds its home in a certain kind of late modern discourse'.⁶ It is only intelligible within a specific historical context – a context devoid of the metaphysical principles affirmed within the Catholic intellectual tradition. Hence, while St. Thomas asks about the essential purpose (*finis*) of human life, the question of its 'meaning', by contrast, is subjective, emotive, and plagued by irresolvable tensions. Hochschild concludes that the question of meaning is, ironically, a 'meaningless' question: 'along with other 19th century inventions such as the telephone, the electric lightbulb, and the internal combustion engine, it may be hard to imagine life without it, but it is a late civilizational

¹Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace* (South Bend: St. Augustines Press, 2016), p. 77.

²The meaning of life' has, especially since the 1950s, received increasingly serious attention from both Continental and Analytic philosophers. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991); Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1983); Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Thaddeus Metz, 'Recent Work on the Meaning of Life', *Ethics*, 112 (2002), 781–814; John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

³It has appeared in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes, Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes*), at least eight encyclicals of John Paul II, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. See Joshua P. Hochschild, 'John Paul II's Gamble with "the Meaning of Life"', *Studia Gilsoniana*, 10 (2021), 491–515. See esp. pp. 491–92 and 509–12.

⁴Exceptions include Josef Pieper, 'A Plea for Philosophy', in *For the Love of Wisdom: Essays on the Nature of Philosophy*, trans. by Roger Wasserman (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 81–156; Edward Feser, 'Aquinas and the Meaning of Life', in *The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers*, ed. by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 110–17; Mirela Oliva, 'Beauty and Meaning: From Aquinas to Gadamer and Nancy', in *Causality and Resemblance: Medieval Approaches to the Explanation of Nature*, ed. by Maria-Jesús Soto-Bruna (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2018), pp. 159–71; Mirela Oliva, 'No Meaning for Believers? A Reply to Joshua Hochschild', *Studia Gilsoniana*, 10 (2021), 517–44; Joseph Cherny, 'A Defense of Robert Nozick's Theory of the Meaning of Life', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 94 (2020), 59–72.

⁵Hochschild, 'John Paul II's Gamble with "the Meaning of Life"', p. 493.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 494, 497.

invention'.⁷ Because the question's very formulation marks a dramatic shift away from the concepts St. Thomas employed, Hochschild urges Catholic intellectuals to simply refrain from asking it.⁸

In spite of his counsel to avoid it, however, Hochschild does entertain the possibility that the question of life's meaning could be 'adopted as a relevant question', so long as it is 'brought back within the orbit of a more substantive moral and metaphysical perspective' – an approach he associates with John Paul II.⁹ In what follows, I argue that Thomists have good reason to pursue this possibility. This is because, even though he never uttered the phrase, St. Thomas offers the kind of moral and metaphysical perspective that originally made 'the meaning of life' intelligible. First, I argue that closer attention to the context in which the phrase emerges (that of German Romanticism) can clarify why much of the modern discourse on 'the meaning of life' succumbs to Hochschild's critique. I then argue, contra Hochschild, that even in the writings of its earliest modern proponents, there are compelling reasons to hold that 'the meaning of life' was always more at home within a Christian conceptual framework like St. Thomas'. Finally, I argue that St. Thomas' account of providence and divine art in particular explain the purposefulness and significance of the world, such that Thomists who appeal to these notions are well positioned to address the question of life's meaning in contemporary philosophical debates.

2. A modern history of meaning

In one sense, Hochschild is correct that 'the meaning of life' is a nineteenth – or rather, late eighteenth – century invention. Variants of the phrase (*Der Sinn des Lebens*) first appear in the writings of the German Romantics at the University of Jena; all of whom were disciples of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. As Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia have documented, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was likely the first to use this phrasing when he wrote of 'life and life's meaning' (*Leben und Lebenssinn*) in a letter to Friedrich Schiller in 1796.¹⁰ Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (better known as Novalis) used similar wording in an unpublished manuscript from 1797 or 1798: 'only an artist can divine the meaning of life'.¹¹ Soon after, their companion Friedrich Schlegel wrote of 'the holy meaning of life' at the end of his novel, *Lucinde* (1799), which popularized the phrase and influenced Thomas Carlyle, the first to use its English equivalent in his novel, *Sartor Resartus* (1834).¹² It is indisputable, then, that

⁷Ibid., p. 499.

⁸Ibid., p. 508.

⁹Ibid., p. 512.

¹⁰Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, *Briefwechsel zwischen Schiller und Goethe in den Jahren 1794 bis 1805, Erster Band (1794 bis 1797)* (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1856), p. 183. Cf. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia, 'Postscript: The Blue Flower', in *The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers*, ed. by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 278 and 283, n. 26.

¹¹Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 107. See Leach and Tartaglia, 'Postscript: The Blue Flower', p. 276.

¹²Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 129; Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books*, ed. by Mark Engel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 137.

‘the meaning of life’ emerged within a small circle of European scholars and artists who shared a common intellectual heritage.¹³

These Jena Romantics also employ similar phrases, such as ‘the meaning of the world’ or ‘the meaning of human existence’ (*Sinn des Daseins*), and they do not consistently distinguish these from ‘the meaning of life’.¹⁴ But what do they mean by ‘meaning’ in such phrases? Terms they use – such as *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* – had a variety of definitions by the end of the eighteenth century. All of them suggest some mental activity or content. According to Steven Cassedy, ‘*Sinn*’ originally meant ‘sending’, ‘movement’, or ‘direction’ and quickly came to encompass the relation between a mind and its object.¹⁵ In many instances, it overlaps with ‘*Bedeutung*’ (from *Bedeuten*: ‘to signify’): as when words, expressions, and works of art signify some idea in the mind or spirit (*Geist*) of an author. So when the Romantics speak of the ‘meaning of life’, they are suggesting that life has significance: that it signifies something intelligible like words and works of art do. Novalis, for instance, writes that ‘everything we experience is a communication. Thus the world is indeed a communication—the revelation of a spirit’.¹⁶ Schlegel notes that nature ‘speaks’ to us with ‘the deep significance of the mysterious hieroglyphs’.¹⁷ And in his *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–1796), Goethe speaks of events in the world possessing ‘a great sense’ akin to the meaning of a story.¹⁸

‘*Sinn*’ and ‘*Bedeutung*’ could also mean ‘will’, ‘desire’, or ‘inclination’ – that is, the purpose that an agent gives to its objects or its actions; as when we ask after the purpose of an artifact or behavior (‘did you mean to do that?’).¹⁹ When the Romantics speak of meaning in this sense, they are suggesting that our lives or the world are directed toward some end, as if intended by a conscious agent. Such descriptions are unsurprising given the influence of Fichte, who saw the will of an ‘I’ (*Ich*) as the world’s ultimate origin and explanation.²⁰ Schlegel too affirms that only the creative intention of spirit could give meaning and purpose to the world.²¹ And in his *The Novices of Sais* (1802), Novalis notes that spirit can ‘[impart] to a whole life guidance, stability, and meaning’.²²

¹³Hochschild, ‘John Paul II’s Gamble with “the Meaning of Life”’, p. 497; cf. Leach and Tartaglia, ‘Postscript: The Blue Flower’, p. 277.

¹⁴Oliva, ‘No Meaning for Believers?’, p. 522.

¹⁵Steven Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 48.

¹⁶Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 81.

¹⁷Schlegel, *Lucinde*, p. 129. Cf. Leach and Tartaglia, ‘Postscript: The Blue Flower’, p. 276.

¹⁸Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gesamtausgabe der Werke und Schriften in zweiundzwanzig Bänden* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1961), 7, p. 139. Translation in Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 63.

¹⁹Cassedy, p. 48; ‘Sense/Meaning’, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 949–67.

²⁰Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge: With the First and Second Introductions*, ed. by Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 74–82.

²¹Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Ideen’, in *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 241. Cf. Leach and Tartaglia, ‘Postscript: The Blue Flower’, p. 277.

²²Novalis, *The Disciples at Sais and Other Fragments by Novalis*, trans. by Una Birch (London: Methuen, 1903), p. 103. Cf. Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 62.

So for the Jena Romantics, our lives and the world ‘mean’ in the sense that they (1) signify or (2) have purpose. But these poets, novelists, and artists do not justify their use of this language in light of one, unified conceptual framework as Hochschild suggests. The Romantics are all reacting to the ‘disenchanted’ effects of the French Enlightenment: the transformation in our understanding of nature from something sacred and purposeful to little more than a lifeless and quantifiable mechanism. So they see their work as part of a broader re-valuation of nature, and, in consequence, of human life. Their use of ‘meaning’, therefore, embodies a more complex range of possibilities than Hochschild allows for. It is informed by *competing* conceptual frameworks, as they attempt to both champion Enlightenment ideals (such as subjectivity, autonomy, and freedom) and revitalize premodern ‘enchanted’ understandings of the world.

These competing conceptual frameworks unsurprisingly entail irreconcilable accounts of *how* and *why* our lives possess meaning. The Enlightenment framework to which the Romantics are indebted leads to a theory of meaning’s origin that Leach and Tartaglia call the ‘Romantic idea’. This is the view that we cannot discover an existing reference or order in the world, but must rather *create* it ourselves.²³ We, in other words, are the minds who determine what things signify and what purposes they serve. Take, for instance, Novalis’ assertion that ‘the world must be romanticized’.²⁴ To romanticize, he says, is to impose upon the world a reference or purpose of our own devising and to ‘invest all actions with a great, deep sense [*Sinn*]—giving life a higher meaning [*Bedeutung*]’.²⁵ If nature is a ‘book’, he notes, then we are its authors: ‘each life is a story ... life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us’.²⁶

Yet because such a view is only intelligible in light of modern Enlightenment ideals – many of which are shared by the Romantics’ French antagonists – it suffers from the irresolvable tensions generated by those ideals. Here Hochschild’s criticisms find their mark. If our creative efforts are really the source of meaning in the world, the implication is that the world as such – including human life – is originally devoid of meaning. The world is not a bearer or source from which we can *derive* significance and purpose. Rather, things only possess meaning insofar as we act upon them. To many critics, this is tantamount to denying that there is a ‘meaning of life’ after all: there can only be, at most, a meaning to our experience of it. Some of the earliest critics of Fichte and his heirs, such as Friedrich Jacobi, characterize this view as ‘nihilism’: the view that there is ultimately nothing meaningful in itself apart from our ego. In his *Letter to Fichte* (1799), he suggests that anything meaningful on this view amounts to little

²³Leach and Tartaglia, ‘Postscript: The Blue Flower’, pp. 280–81.

²⁴Novalis, *Novalis Schriften: die Werke Friedrich von Hardenburgs*, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960). Translation in Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 64.

²⁵Novalis, *Novalis Schriften: die Werke Friedrich von Hardenburgs*, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1965), p. 577. Translation in Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 63. See also Alison Stone, ‘Being, Knowledge and Nature in Novalis’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46 (2008), 141–63, 152–53.

²⁶Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 66.

more than ‘determinations of our own self’, rather than something objective characterizing the way things are.²⁷ Yet paradoxically, this ego of ours proves incapable of imbuing its own existence with any significance or purpose. It is itself *no thing* – ‘the empty illusion of something’.²⁸ We can perhaps give some significance and direction to our discrete conscious acts. But these, like our ego, would be adrift on a vaster sea of meaninglessness. ‘Our entire cognition’, Jacobi concludes, ‘contains nothing, nothing whatsoever, that could have any truly objective meaning at all’.²⁹

The subsequent history of this ‘Romantic idea’ appears to confirm Hochschild’s judgment that the question of life’s meaning dispenses with metaphysical claims about the world, nature, or existence and contents itself with a kind of subjectivism.³⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer was among the first to use the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ after the Jena Romantics in 1844.³¹ Yet for him, meaning is not a significance or purpose that characterizes reality as such. It is something that applies merely to our experience (the realm of ‘representation’). The world in itself, by contrast, is simply an aimless and unending motion, unguided by any purposes.³² At a deeper level, therefore, life is utterly *vain*:

[E]very person invariably has purposes and motives by which he guides his conduct; and he is always able to give an account of his particular actions. But if he were asked why he wills generally, or why in general he wills to exist, he would have no answer; indeed, the question would indeed seem to him absurd.³³

Friedrich Nietzsche likewise invokes ‘the meaning of life’ in his 1874 ‘Untimely Meditations’.³⁴ And his proclamation that ‘God is dead’ in *The Gay Science* (1882) is in part an acknowledgment that the world is devoid of significance and purpose. Meaning for Nietzsche becomes the sole patrimony of his ‘Supermen’ (*Übermenschen*): the future race he believed strong enough to face the inherent meaninglessness of the world and to forge new values of their own: ‘It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world because one organizes a small portion of it oneself’.³⁵

²⁷Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ‘Jacobi to Fichte (1799)’, in *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. by George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), p. 510. See also Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ‘David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a Dialogue’, in *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. by George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), pp. 264–65.

²⁸Jacobi, ‘David Hume on Faith’, p. 297.

²⁹Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ‘On Transcendental Idealism’, in *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, trans. by George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), p. 337.

³⁰Hochschild, ‘John Paul II’s Gamble with “the Meaning of Life”’, p. 503.

³¹Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 233.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 318–41.

³³Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E. F. J. Payne, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 163.

³⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations*, ed. by Daniel Breazeale, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 152.

³⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 318.

By the twentieth century, thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus draw the logical conclusion that *the absurd*, rather than a world of meaning, is the real legacy of the 'Romantic idea'. For these theorists of the absurd, we are faced with the tension between our desire for significance and purpose in our lives and the world's apparent refusal to provide them. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre interprets 'meaning' as a feature found only within our subjective agency: human agents have form and pursue ends for a variety of projects in life. But no discrete choices of ours have the power to render the world itself or the fact that we exist in the first place something meaningful. Underlying our free acts is a brute reality devoid of sense and definition.³⁶ In 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (1945), he confirms that a world of genuine meaning would require a divine artisan – whose existence Sartre himself rejects in the name of human freedom:

When we think of God the Creator, we usually conceive of him as a superlative artisan Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine intelligence [However] there is no human nature, because there is no God to conceive of it Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence Prior to that projection of the self, nothing exists, not even in divine intelligence and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be.³⁷

This brief historical survey suggests that even though 'the meaning of life' emerges in the milieu of post-Enlightenment European philosophy, it is nonetheless radically attenuated within this conceptual framework. The legacy of the 'Romantic idea' allows for a life whose distinct projects can be given some reference and direction, but whose existence as such can never be rendered meaningful; in a world without intelligible form or ends. We are left with a discourse that offers no account of the meaning of life after all, but only an account of how and why our lives *lack* significance and purpose. Consequently, a number of contemporary Analytic philosophers have resorted to labeling variants of this view theories of meaning 'in' life, rather than 'of' life.³⁸ And they have largely abandoned the task of providing an account of the latter, as *meaninglessness* or absurdity appears to be the only possible fruit of such a labor.

³⁶Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 481–556.

³⁷Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. by Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 21–23. Sartre's rejection of God as an artisan helps to illustrate what, in my estimation, makes 'the meaning of life' unintelligible within a modern philosophical framework. It is not merely that early modern philosophers abandoned a conception of nature governed by intrinsic formal and final causes (substantial form and teleology). It is that, on their principles, it no longer made sense to characterize nature and its intrinsic features as expressions of divine intelligence.

³⁸Notable examples include Metz, *Meaning in Life*; Thaddeus Metz, 'Meaning in Life as the Right Metric', *Society*, 53 (2016), 294–96; Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Candace Vogler, 'The Place of Virtue in a Meaningful Life', in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. by Jennifer A. Frey and Candace Vogler (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 84–92.

3. An ancient alternative?

However, the ambiguity of Romanticism's historical context permits us to draw a conclusion that Hochschild does not. The failure of post-Enlightenment philosophy to account for significance and purpose in the world suggests that 'the meaning of life' was never truly 'at home' in this conceptual discourse. In fact, Novalis himself suggests that it may be *more* intelligible within the kind of premodern religious world that he was attempting to revive. He notes that, far from a nineteenth century 'invention', 'meaning' is a word for what *disappears* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In his unpublished fragments from 1798, he argues that it is only with the rise of 'the modern way of thinking' that life and the world are first conceivable as *meaningless* (*unbedeutend*): 'The age has passed when the spirit of God could be understood. The meaning of the world is lost' and all that remains is its empty 'letter'.³⁹ Moreover, Novalis occasionally describes 'romanticizing' not as investing the world with meaning, but as rediscovering something that the world already possesses, apart from our creative efforts.⁴⁰ Both Goethe and Novalis characterize this as reclaiming an *ancient*, rather than a modern conception of nature:⁴¹ that for which nature is 'visible spirit' and natural things signify the presence of souls (*Seelen*) and spirits (*Geistern*).⁴²

According to Frederick Beiser, because the Romantics were engaged in a project of 're-enchanting' our understanding of the world, what they admired most about ancient religion is the notion that nature is the visible expression of an *infinite* Spirit: 'a unitary, self-sufficient substance'⁴³ capable of infusing the natural world with 'a higher meaning ... the finite with the appearance of the infinite'.⁴⁴ This is the conceptual frame for which Novalis expresses nostalgia: 'Formerly, all things were spirit appearances. Now we can see nothing but dead repetition, which we do not understand. The meaning [*Bedeutung*] of the hieroglyph is missing. We are still living on the fruit of better times'.⁴⁵ So although 'the meaning of life' is first uttered in the late eighteenth century, it is not always, as Hochschild would have it, uttered to express late eighteenth century ideas. It is just as correct to characterize it as a modern way of referring to something decidedly premodern: the significance and purpose given to the world by a divine spirit.

Remarkably, in his *Christendom or Europa* (1799), Novalis identifies medieval Catholicism as the zenith of this 'ancient' view of meaning. Catholic Europe, he writes, was a world of 'immortal meaning', wherein the 'meaning of the invisible' suffused all of life. Enlightenment disenchantment, with its 'stripping' of nature, is, therefore, a symptom of Europe's hatred of its Catholic past.⁴⁶ Admittedly, Novalis' depiction of the medieval Church was deeply contested and not particularly informed by history. But it contains nonetheless a suggestive kernel of truth. Cassedy affirms that in the ancient world, there is 'virtually nothing like' this use of 'meaning' before the rise

³⁹Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 81, 144. Cf. Stone, 'Being, Knowledge and Nature in Novalis', p. 148.

⁴⁰Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 60.

⁴¹Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, pp. 63–64.

⁴²Stone, 'Being, Knowledge and Nature in Novalis', pp. 147–48.

⁴³Stone, p. 146. See Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 60.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 144.

of Christianity.⁴⁷ It appears first, he argues, in the writings of early Christians such as St. Augustine, who compares natural things to signs (*signa*) possessing a meaning (*sensus*) intended by a divine author.⁴⁸ In fact, Novalis' image of life as a novel is undoubtedly a legacy of early Christian reflection. As Hans Blumenberg argues, the metaphor of nature as a 'book' that God authored was ubiquitous among the Church Fathers and Medieval Christians. St. Anthony of Egypt compared the nature of created things to words written by God, always available for him to read.⁴⁹ St. Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, and St. Bonaventure all compare the natural world to Scripture – and thus things in the world to words whose 'meaning and significance [*sensum et significationem*]' reflects the intention of their creator.⁵⁰ Mirela Oliva concurs, arguing that the 'spiritual meaning' (*sensus spiritualis*) developed in biblical hermeneutics is the true precedent for later, existential uses of 'meaning' – concerning as it does the significance of human life and created things conforming to the divine will.⁵¹ She is right therefore to conclude that "'the meaning of life" comes from a long linguistic sedimentation' and 'is not, as Hochschild claims, a sudden appearance in Western philosophical vocabulary'.⁵² Indeed, in certain passages, it is likely that the Jena Romantics utilized the lexicon of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in an attempt to reclaim the connotations that Latin meaning words (like *sensus*, *sententia*, *significatio*, etc.) took on in an ancient and medieval Christian context.

4. Meaning as purpose in St. Thomas

We are now in a position to evaluate Hochschild's recommendation with respect to St. Thomas. Is the notion of life's 'meaning' incompatible with St. Thomas' metaphysical framework, as Hochschild suggests? As we've seen, phrases like 'the meaning of life' among the Romantics can refer to (1) *significance*: things in the world bear a signifying relation to ideas in the mind of an author, like words and artifacts do; or (2) *purpose*: things in the world exhibit order and direction, as if intended by a mind and will. We've also seen that, in at least some of his writings, Novalis uses the term 'meaning' to describe these as objective features of nature, caused by a divine mind or spirit. Finally, we've seen that for Novalis, this notion finds its most coherent expression in a pre-modern Christian worldview – especially that of Medieval Catholicism. If this suggestion has merit, then far from conflicting with the 'the meaning of life', we would expect a framework such as St. Thomas' to render it intelligible.

Consider first meaning as purpose. Hochschild contrasts St. Thomas' understanding of purpose (*finis*) with meaning. Whereas 'meaning' suggests subjectivity, awareness,

⁴⁷Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 7–8.

⁴⁸Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book II; Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, pp. 29–31.

⁴⁹Hans Blumenberg, *The Readability of the World*, trans. by Robert Savage and David Roberts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, pp. 32–34. See also Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, 'God as Author: Thinking Through a Metaphor', *Modern Theology*, 31 (2015), 573–85, esp. 575.

⁵⁰Hugh of Saint-Victor, *Eruditio Didascalica*, in *Opera Omnia*, II (Paris: Migne, 1880), VII, p. 4; translation in Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?*, p. 34.

⁵¹Oliva, 'No Meaning for Believers?', p. 527.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 523.

or consciousness, 'by "purpose", we don't mean an individual agent's intention or conscious sense of purpose, nor a particular path or vocation to fulfill, but the intrinsic, essential *why* of the species'.⁵³ As Robert Pasnau notes, this view of nature as intrinsically purposeful was almost universally held in medieval physics and theology.⁵⁴ As a medieval Aristotelian, St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle that nature (*physis*) is 'a certain principle and cause of change and stability' within things, determining not only what they are but what they act 'for the sake of'.⁵⁵ A thing's purpose is therefore determined intrinsically by its substantial form (*morphe*): 'upon the form follows an inclination to the end, or to an action, or something of the sort; for everything, insofar as it is in act, acts and tends towards that which is in accordance with its form'.⁵⁶ Aristotle too contrasts this kind of determination to ends with the kind imposed by an extrinsic agent or intelligence. He therefore argues in Book II of the *Physics* that nature is a sufficient cause of end-directedness in things, without the deliberative activity of a mind or will.⁵⁷ No appeal to a divine intelligence or 'imperative ruler' is required to explain it.⁵⁸

However, while St. Thomas affirms with Aristotle that nature is a genuine cause of purposefulness within things, he denies that it is a *sufficient* cause. Nature may be an intrinsic principle of motion, but not a principle of motion *toward an end*.⁵⁹ Its teleological character must be 'traced back to an intellect' as its first, 'directing principle'.⁶⁰ Take, for example, the pattern of reasoning displayed in St. Thomas' fifth way (*quinta via*):

We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly [*ex intentione*], do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer.

⁵³Hochschild, 'John Paul II's Gamble with "the Meaning of Life"', pp. 499–500.

⁵⁴See Robert Pasnau, 'Teleology in the Later Middle Ages', in *Teleology: A History*, ed. by Jeffrey McDonough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 90–115.

⁵⁵Aristotle, *Physics*, ed. by David Bostock, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Book II, part 1, 33. Cf. Edward Feser, 'Between Aristotle and William Paley: Aquinas's Fifth Way', *Nova et Vetera*, 11 (2013), 709.

⁵⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.5, co. and q.77, a.6, co. Hereafter, *ST*. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of the *Summa theologiae* are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948). See also Lawrence Dewan, OP, 'St. Thomas's "Fifth Way" Revisited', *Universitas*, 31 (2004), 58; Monte Ransome Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 33–35.

⁵⁷Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, part 1, 33.

⁵⁸Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* in W.D. Ross, ed. *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 9, part 2, trans. by J. Solomon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), Book VII, 15, 1249B10–15.

⁵⁹*ST* I-II, q. 6, a.1. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting the centrality of St. Thomas' notion of the transcendental good (*bonum*) not only for his discussions of teleology, but more particularly for his discussion of humanity's ultimate end (and thus the 'meaning' of human life). See especially *ST* I, q. 5 and *ST* I-II, q. 1.

⁶⁰*ST*, I, q.15, a.1.

Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.⁶¹

We find parallel arguments ‘from the governance of things’ (*ex gubernatione rerum*)⁶² in a number of his writings; among them his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* and the *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

[Aristotle] says, therefore, first that it must be pointed out that nature is among the number of causes which act for the sake of something For things which do not know the end do not tend toward the end unless they are directed by one who does know, as the arrow is directed by the archer. Hence if nature acts for an end, it is necessary that it be ordered by someone who is intelligent ...⁶³

Moreover, that natural bodies are moved and made to operate for an end, even though they do not know their end, was proved But it is impossible for things that do not know their end to work for that end, and to reach that end in an orderly way, unless they are moved by someone possessing knowledge of the end, as in the case of the arrow directed to the target by the archer. So, the whole working of nature must be ordered by some sort of knowledge.⁶⁴

As Lawrence Dewan notes, all of these arguments affirm that teleology has its proper origin in intelligence: there is a fundamental ‘link between *finality*, i.e., the “telic”, and *mind*’.⁶⁵ And as St. Thomas notes in the *De potentia*, for an agent to order something to an end in the truest sense, it must know the end, grasp the concept (*ratio*) of an end, and know the relation between the thing and its end.⁶⁶ Each of these requires a mind, and so is characteristic of ‘an intelligent and voluntary agent’ capable of directing and moving itself to ends: ‘All ordering, therefore, is necessarily effected by means of the wisdom of a being endowed with intelligence’.⁶⁷

⁶¹ST I, q. 2, a.3, co.

⁶²Ibid. See also ST I, q. 14, a. 8; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence, Part 1*, trans. by Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 3.64. Hereafter, SCG 3; Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), q. 5, a. 2. Hereafter, *De veritate*.

⁶³Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, trans. by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spahn, W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), II.12. Hereafter, *In Phys. Cf. Dewan, ‘St. Thomas’s “Fifth Way” Revisited’*, p. 55.

⁶⁴SCG 3.64. The same argument from governance appears in *De veritate* 5.2 and Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. by Fabian R. Larcher and James A. Weisheipl (Albany: Magi Books, 1980), prologue, 3. Hereafter, *Super Ioan*.

⁶⁵See Dewan, ‘St. Thomas’s “Fifth Way” Revisited’, pp. 54 ff.

⁶⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, trans. by English Dominican Fathers (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952), 3.15. Hereafter, *De potentia*. For an argument to the effect that ends must exist intentionally in an intellect in order to exert final causality, see Feser, ‘Between Aristotle and William Paley: Aquinas’s Fifth Way’, pp. 734–35; John Peterson, *Mind, Truth, and Teleology: An Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2015), pp. 1–11.

⁶⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two: Creation*, trans. by James F. Anderson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 2.24.

It follows for St. Thomas that anything lacking intelligence which nonetheless exhibits purposefulness – such as nature – *derives* this feature from some intelligence. Even though in one sense nature is intrinsically purposeful, in another and more fundamental sense it owes this to the action of an intellect.⁶⁸ The presence of purposefulness in the non-rational world is therefore a sign that nature has received something proper to intelligence; just as the determination of an arrow's flight to a definite target points to the intention of the archer.⁶⁹

For St. Thomas, then, nature is revealed to be the instrument or *medium* of an intellectual activity transcending nature: 'the work of nature is the work of an intellect'.⁷⁰ It is, in the end, nothing but 'a certain kind of art [*ratio cuiusdam artis*], i.e., the divine art, impressed upon things, by which these things are moved to a determinate end'.⁷¹ And this entails that the ends of all things – as well as the order they bear toward those ends – must exist in God's mind and will, before and apart from their existence in nature. This is the feature of St. Thomas' account that best harmonizes with the notion of meaning, since 'meaning' suggests purpose *as it exists in a mind and will* and not merely in nature. St. Thomas simply, and more traditionally, describes this as God's providence. *Providentia* for St. Thomas refers to the ends and the 'eternal *ratio* by which God orders all things' to those ends in the divine mind (*ratio ordinis rerum in finem in mente divina*). In its more general use, it is a kind of disposition (*habitus*) in the practical intellect that 'implies ordination to ends' and pertains to 'the form of a thing considered as directed to an end ...'.⁷² In God, it is the aspect of his intellect to which purposes in the created world correspond: that 'type or order of things toward their end' that 'pre-exists in the divine mind', like the foresight exercised by a father over his family or by a ruler over his subjects.⁷³ And this only comes to exist in nature by an act of God's will.⁷⁴

5. Meaning as significance in St. Thomas

Consider next meaning as significance. Does St. Thomas hold that things in the world express or *signify* anything existing in a mind; akin to the way that words or artifacts signify? For thinkers such as Anaxagoras and Plato, natural things bear a 'likeness' to a mind (*Nous*) or eternal forms and 'patterns' (*paradeimata*) existing apart from them.

⁶⁸ST I-II, q. 6, a. 2, co.

⁶⁹*De potentia* 3.15; *De veritate* 22.1.

⁷⁰*De potentia*, 3.15.

⁷¹In *Phys* II.14.8. See also Pasnau, 'Teleology in the Later Middle Ages', p. 93; Feser, 'Between Aristotle and William Paley', pp. 716 ff.

⁷²*De veritate* 5.1.

⁷³Ibid. cf. ST I, q. 22, a. 1, co.; *De veritate* 5.2, ad. 10: 'that order which is found in nature is not caused by nature Consequently, nature needs providence to implant such an order in it'.

⁷⁴ST I, q. 14, a. 8; *De veritate*, 5.1; SCG, 3.64. 'Governance' for St. Thomas signifies when an agent intends an end for another. It implies that a thing's tendency toward its end exists first in the intelligent agent directing it and only exists within the thing itself because the agent wills it. It is analogous to how a ruler intends the good of his or her people and then communicates this tendency to them, ordering them to the common good. In the case of nature, this occurs principally through God's will, since both intention and inclinations – even those found within nature – are caused by the will: 'inclination is through the will'. Yet since on St. Thomas' view the 'will does not ordain' (ST I-II, q. 12, a. 1, ad. 3), it is more proper to say God's intellect is responsible for orienting things to their ends while his will acts as an efficient cause to move them.

These function as exemplars, which are necessary to explain the order and determination of natural kinds: how they come to exist in this way rather than that. Yet in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle dismisses this kind of causal explanation as so many ‘empty words’.⁷⁵ In the *Physics*, he notes that what distinguishes a natural substance from an artifact is that the former possesses a principle that is ‘directly present in it’ (substantial form).⁷⁶ On his view, nature is *already* ordered and determined *from within*, so its forms need not ‘refer’ to any extrinsic exemplars, whether existing in a mind or not. Aristotle, therefore, not only rejects Plato’s Ideas, but he denies that gods design or craft natural things as human artisans do.⁷⁷

In many respects, St. Thomas appears to be a faithful Aristotelian. Like Aristotle, he gives substantial form pride of place in explaining the determination of natural things. Moreover, in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, Thomas echoes Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s Ideas. Yet just as he does with respect to purpose, St. Thomas denies that intrinsic forms are *sufficient* causes of the order and determination found within the natural world.⁷⁸ He insists that appeal must ultimately be made to exemplars in the divine mind: even substantial forms in nature must be ‘reduced to the divine wisdom as its first principle, for divine wisdom devised the order of the universe ...’.⁷⁹

St. Thomas once more distinguishes between the limited way in which nature functions as a cause and the fuller, sufficient way in which the divine intellect functions as a cause. He notes, following Aristotle, that every natural agent – that is, an efficient cause acting in virtue of its substantial form – acts to induce its form in the things it generates: humans generate other humans, fire generates more fire, etc. The resulting form thus bears a relation of likeness to – or signifies – the form of the agent. However, for St. Thomas, natural agents are in this way only able to educe or draw out the forms of what they generate from matter, determining why ‘this’ matter takes ‘this’ form. They cannot account for the very existence of the forms they educe.⁸⁰ This requires an act of creation, and thus the operation of an intelligent cause beyond nature. And since this cause acts by intellect and will, he must possess in his mind ideas which serve as exemplars of the intrinsic forms he creates in nature. These then help determine the forms of natural things, akin to the way that the idea of a house in the mind of a builder does; ‘since the builder intends to build his house like the form conceived in his mind’.⁸¹

St. Thomas draws the same conclusion from the principles of teleology we have already examined. In a variety of his works, he notes that when nature acts to generate new substances – ‘as a man generates a man, or fire generates fire’ – the form of the new substance ‘must be the end’ or goal that some natural agent acts for. Generation

⁷⁵Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by W.D. Ross in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1.9.991a20-31, 1566; cf. Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 46–47.

⁷⁶Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, part 1, 33.

⁷⁷Johnson, *Aristotle on Teleology*, p. 262.

⁷⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, trans. by John P. Rowan (Chicago: Regnery, 1961), lect. 15, n. 232–233.

⁷⁹ST I, q. 44, a. 3.

⁸⁰*De potentia* 3.4; cf. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes*, p. 186.

⁸¹ST I, q. 15, a. 1.

then is an instance of purposeful action. Since nature itself lacks intelligence, it cannot sufficiently account for this inclination to generate a new substance. It, therefore, points to the existence of an intelligent cause capable of knowing ends and ordering natural agents to them. Even the ‘likeness’ that natural things have to the agents that generate them is only fully explained by the providence of an intelligent cause; the ideas of which natural things must also resemble or signify.

Once more, then, we find that St. Thomas appears to countenance what the Romantics intend by phrases such as ‘the meaning of life’. For him, intrinsic forms in nature depend upon ‘types of all things’, existing before and apart from them, as exemplars ‘in the divine mind’.⁸² The implication is that the order and integrity of things in the world can only be explained insofar as they express or signify the content of God’s mind: ‘from his intellect’ – and by the command of his will – ‘forms flow forth [*effluunt*] into all creatures ... just as knowledge in us is an impression [*sigillatio*] of things in our souls, so conversely the forms of things are nothing other than a certain impression of the divine knowledge in things’.⁸³ Josef Pieper notes that this gives to all things a ‘word-character’⁸⁴ for St. Thomas: like the words bearing an author’s meaning, creatures are ‘charged’ with divine intention: ‘... man and things have a meaning, an importance, a significance, indeed, a “whatness” and a “nature”’, because they are and must be ‘patterned after a divine design...’.⁸⁵

Likewise for St. Thomas, as for the Romantics, natural things are akin to works of art. Just like paintings, sculptures, and poems, their meaning consists in the ways in which they conform to the idea an artist conceives as the end of her work. Following St. Augustine, St. Thomas compares the ideas in God’s mind to divine art (*ars*): the virtue of the practical intellect governing the right production of things.⁸⁶ Because God causes things to be by conforming them to ‘the exemplar likeness of whatever is made by him’, it is proper to describe God as a kind of artisan: ‘God, who is the first principle of all things, is compared to creatures as artificer to artifacts (*ut artifex ad artificata*)’.⁸⁷ Divine art then is one of the central features of St. Thomas’ metaphysics that accounts for the kind of significance later thinkers associate with ‘the meaning of life’.

6. Conclusion

There is reason to be optimistic, then, that Thomists can adopt the question of life’s meaning as ‘a relevant question’ and answer it affirmatively. As Edward Feser puts it,

⁸²ST I, q. 44, a. 3.

⁸³*De veritate*, 2.1, ad.6. Translation from Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes*, p. 162.

⁸⁴Josef Pieper, ‘A Plea for Philosophy’, p. 125. See also Matthew Cuddeback, ‘Josef Pieper On The Truth of All Things And The World’s True Face’, in *A Cosmopolitan Hermit: Modernity and Tradition in the Philosophy of Josef Pieper*, ed. by Bernard N. Schumacher (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 245. See also Josef Pieper, ‘What Does It Mean to Say “God Speaks”? Preliminary Reflections to a Theological Debate’, in *Problems of Modern Faith*, trans. by Jan van Heurck (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1985), pp. 143–44.

⁸⁵Josef Pieper, ‘Wahrheit der Dinge—ein verschollener Begriff’, in *Miszellen, Register und Gesamtbibliographie (Josef Pieper Werke*, vol. 8.1), ed. by Berthold Wald (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2005), p. 395; translation from Cuddeback, ‘Josef Pieper On The Truth of All Things’, pp. 249–50.

⁸⁶*Super Ioan*, 1, lect. 2.77.

⁸⁷ST III, q. 3, a. 8, co.; ST I, q. 27, a. 1, ad. 3; translation in Simon Francis Gaine, ‘God Is an Artificer: A Response to Edward Feser’, *Nova et Vetera*, 14 (2016), 495–501, 497.

even though ‘the question of the meaning of life barely even arises’ for St. Thomas, it can ‘readily be given an affirmative answer when it does arise’.⁸⁸ While Hochschild is correct that much of the post-Enlightenment ‘meaning of life’ discourse ends in incoherence, I hope to have shown that Thomists needn’t respond by ignoring the question it raises. Careful attention to the diverse ways in which the German Romantics used the phrase supports a conclusion Hochschild refrains from drawing: that the ‘meaning of life’ was always in a sense more at home in a conceptual framework such as St. Thomas’. This is because his metaphysics can account for the purposefulness and significance of the world. More specifically, it reveals that what some of its earliest proponents intended by ‘the meaning of life’ was always in principle accounted for by St. Thomas’ understanding of providence and divine art. Rather than refrain from asking the question, then, Thomists ought to engage in philosophical debates about life’s meaning with confidence, ready to demonstrate the superior explanatory power of St. Thomas’ thought before the many post-Enlightenment voices that dominate the discourse. In doing so, they may very well do for their contemporaries, despairing of the conceptual poverty of the alternatives, what St. Thomas did for the Maritains: ‘enlist their total allegiance’ and ‘deliver’ them ‘from the nightmare of a sinister and useless world’.⁸⁹

⁸⁸Feser, ‘Aquinas and the Meaning of Life’, p. 117.

⁸⁹I would like to thank Joshua Hochschild for kindly sharing a pre-publication draft of his article (cited above) with me and for sharing his thoughts and suggestions, all of which helped greatly to improve my thinking on this topic.